DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 395 227 CG 026 958

AUTHOR Sheldon-Keller, Adrienne; West, Malcolm
TITLE Attachment within the Agency/Communion Paradigm.
PUB DATE [95]
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Psychological Association (103rd, New York, NY, August 11-15, 1995).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Information Analyses (070)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Attachment Behavior; Emotional Development; *Individual Characteristics; *Individual Development; Models; Parent Child Relationship; Personality Development; *Personality Studies; *Personality Theories; State of the Art Reviews
IDENTIFIERS *Agency Theory; Polarity

ABSTRACT

This paper synthesizes a variety of perspectives, with an emphasis on attachment theory, on the agency/communion polarity as first defined by David Bakan (1966). The question researchers sought to answer was whether or not agency/communion is best approached as a polarity--opposite and opposing forces, forces in the personality which have often been identified as primarily masculine (agency) versus primarily feminine (communion)--or is best viewed as figure/ground. Drawing on results from various researchers, it was agreed that adequate maternal nurturance (communion) was needed for development of the private (agentic) self; there is a necessary equilibrium between self-assertion (agency) and integration (communion) for the proper functioning of a personality; the disparate voices of empowerment of the self (agency) and sustenance of the community (communion) are connected; individuals develop towards self-in-relation (agency within communion); and attachment (communion) contains the affective distress associated with agency. It is concluded that agency and communion are not a polarity but, rather, are a complex figure/ground that best serves development when operating in concert, not in opposition. Contains 13 references. (RJM)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 395 227

Attachment within the Agency/Communion Paradigm

Adrienne Sheldon-Keller, Ph.D.

Department of Psychiatric Medicine, University of Virginia

and

Malcolm West, Ph.D.

Department of Psychiatry, University of Calgary

Presentation at the American Psychological Association Annual Meeting, New York, August 1995

The goal of this presentation is to synthesize a variety of perspectives, with an emphasis on attachment theory, on the agency/communion polarity as first defined by David Bakan (1966). According to Bakan, human personality was significantly shaped by two opposite and opposing tendencies: the tendency towards self-directed, unilateral, aggressively self-interested actions (called *agency* by Bakan) and the tendency towards other-directed, communal mutuality or merger (called *communion* by Bakan). The underlying question that we pose can be simply stated: Is agency/communion best approached as a *polarity* -- that is, as opposite and opposing forces -- forces in the personality which have often been identified as primarily masculine (agency) versus primarily feminine (communion)? Or is it more helpful to understand agency/communion as figure/ground. As Alan Watts once observed, in a different context, is the outline of one the inline of the other (1960). This presentation very much reflects "mental work in progress" -- our goal is to provide you with an overview of some of the key areas and theorists influencing and shaping our perspective on this "polarity."

CG026958

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

A. Sheldon-Keller

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

We begin with an anecdote: Recently, in New York City, a "run-away" elevator became stuck above the 80th floor of the Empire State Building. A young paramedic had to leap across several feet, above 80 floors of nothing, to reach injured passengers in the elevator. Interviewed the following day, he was asked, "Were you scared?" He replied, "I was nervous but I was more concerned about my patients." This anecdote captures, we believe, at least two important points about agency and communion: first, it can often require an exercise of dramatic agency (the dangerous leap) to accomplish a communal goal (rescue of patients). Secondly, a communion goal can function to contain the affective anxiety and distress that can be occasioned by agency.

First, we would like to place agency within the context of Arnold Modell's recent book, *The Private Self* (1993). Modell presents a complex review and critique of theories of the self. It is beyond the bounds of this presentation to attempt an explanation of Modell's use of Gerald Edelman's "neural Darwinism" (1987) to explain the capacities for continuity and adaptation of the self. Instead, we would like to highlight a few simple ideas from Modell's work. As acknowledged directly by Modell, his "private self" is a direct descendant of David Winnicott's "true self" (1965). It is the self that exists in contrast to the "false self" often necessitated by social relationships: the self (or selves) visible to those around us. This private self also seems to contain the ideas captured in Peter Fonagy's formulation of the "reflective self" (Fonagy, Steele, Steele, Moran & Higgitt, 1991). It is the self that is capable of knowledge of self-in-relationships and others-in-relationships. Additionally, it is the self that is autonomous and capable of renewal and extension. It is the self that allows solitude without loneliness, that generates passionate interests and personal motivations. It is, therefore, agentic --directing our world towards personal interests and private goals.

Nonetheless, according to Modell, the formation of this private self depends, not directly upon development of agentic capacities, but rather upon adequate maternal nurturing in infancy. Here we have the first suggestion of attachment theory as relevant to the agency/communion polarity. Modell's synthesis suggests that agency only evolves in the context of an intensely communal relationship -- that communion is the ground which defines the agentic figure.

Now let us leap -- not quite as dramatically as the young paramedic, but abruptly at least -- to Arthur Koestler's book, *The Ghost in the Machine* (1967). In this book, Koestler was concerned with the functioning of complex systems - systems which are complex in both structure and function. According to Koestler, such systems are organized hierarchically, both in structure and function. That is, each component of the system has its own function, subsets of components have discrete functions, and the system as a whole has a unique function.

Koestler used the term "holon" for the components and proposed that the overall system remains stable and functional only as long as the "self-assertive" and "integrative" tendencies of the holons are in equilibrium. The self-assertive tendency bears a striking resemblance to Bakan's agency, as the integrative tendency does to communion. And again, this formulation is evocative of attachment. Attachment is a complex behavioral system and is also part of a larger system of behavioral systems (Hinde, 1982). Note that, in Koestler's formulation, although the tendencies are contrasted, the emphasis is on equilibrium in the service of a larger system. Similarly, Modell's formulation could be construed as an equilibrium, through development, between agency and communion, in the service of a functional private self.

Now we need to make another leap -- or, to use a more appropriate metaphor -- to speak in a different voice. Specifically, we want to integrate into this increasingly complex system, the

voice and point of view from the developing field of women's psychology. First, we consider Carol Gilligan's book, *In a Different Voice* (1982/93). Gilligan was concerned with restoring women's voices to the "narrative of adult development."

Gilligan herself best makes the point we want to highlight here: "...in the adolescent years, male and female voices typically speak of the importance of different truths, the former [male] of the role of separation as it defines and *empowers the self*, the latter [female] of the ongoing process of attachment that creates and *sustains the human community*" (emphases added).

This passage is evocative of Koestler, as Gilligan is concerned with restoring women's lost voice because with that voice silenced, we lose equilibrium in the system, sacrificing our understanding of "...two disparate modes of experience that are in the end connected."

In Gilligan's work, there is the suggestion of agency as masculine and communion as feminine; also of agency as separation and communion as attachment. At this point, I want to remind you of the anecdote offered at the beginning of this presentation and challenge, albeit gently and with reservations, Gilligan's sharp division of the masculine and feminine "holons." Being choosy as is the prerogative of synthesizers, we emphasize the last quote from Gilligan, the reference to "disparate modes...that are in the end connected." This connectedness bears a closer resemblance to figure/ground than to positive/negative polarity.

Continuing with the perspective from women's psychology, we also want to include ideas from the multied-authored *Women's Growth in Connection* -- a book by psychologists at the Stone Center of Wellesley College (Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver & Surrey, 1991). Here Jean Baker Miller, in the chapter on the development of women's sense of self, explicitly cites Bakan's "agency-in-community" phrase but with a different meaning -- or voice. According to Miller,

agency is identified with aggression and action; and action, for women, "...is doing for other(s) within a relationship."

In a later chapter, Janet Surrey develops the meaning of "self-in-relation" - "an evolutionary process of development through relationship." This is a very different view of maturation than the traditional formulation, implicit in Modell's private self, of development from connection, or attachment, to individuation, or separation. "The direction of growth is not toward greater degrees of autonomy or individuation and the breaking of early emotional ties, but toward a process of growth within relationship, where...all...involved are encouraged and challenged to maintain connection..."

Here we have a formulation that is at least suggestive of agency in the service of communion, and of communion as a life-long goal. Which brings us rather neatly to attachment theory.

For this presentation, our primary reference will be John Bowlby's last book on attachment, *A Secure Base* (1988). To briefly review the essentials, attachment is a biologically based behavioral system. In infancy, attachment is predominant over all other behavioral systems, that is, when the attachment system is activated, other behavioral systems are inactivated until attachment needs are met. The function of the attachment behavioral system is to ensure survival of the altricial young by protecting the young from threats to survival. This protection is achieved through proximity to an identified "attachment figure" -- a particular care-giver who is older and wiser. To accomplish this function, the attachment system involves consistent monitoring of the proximity of the special caregiver and a repertoire of specific behaviors (for example, crying,

reaching, clinging, following) to maintain or restore proximity. The role of the attachment figure is to take whatever action is necessary, repeatedly and reliably, to protect the child from harm.

With development, the attachment figure is internalized, becoming a behaviorally and emotionally reliable feature of the child's representational world as well as the physical world. This internal representation, built on and mirroring the physical reality, provides the child with a secure base from which to explore the world.

"A central feature of [Bowlby's] concept of parenting [is] the provision by both parents of a secure base from which a child or an adolescent can make sorties into the outside world and to which he can return knowing for sure that he will be welcomed when he gets there, nourished physically and emotionally, comforted if distressed, reassured if frightened."

Although attachment theory is rich in complexity and offers, as Sroufe and Waters (1977) have pointed out, a powerful "organizing construct" for developmental psychology, there are a few fairly simple points of particular relevance to the agency/communion paradigm.

First, note that the child's attachment system functions to protect the child from danger, but that this function is only fulfilled if the attachment figure, towards whom the behaviors are directed, is capable of and willing to act effectively to protect the child. In other words, the attachment figure must offer *agency* -- agency which, in an ethological sense, is primarily an aggressive protection from danger -- in the service of safety for the child -- that is, agency directed towards a communal purpose.

Conversely, if the attachment needs are adequately met, a secure base is created from which the child can confidently explore the environment. Here we are reminded of Modell's formulation of agency growing out of adequate maternal nurturance. The child's *agency* -- that is,

the child's directed and purposive exploration of the world -- in attachment theory, is the direct outcome of the security offered by an effective attachment relationship.

Thus, the parent's agency, to be successful, must be able to encompass aggression in the service of safety for the child. And the parent's agency in the service of safety is rewarded by the development of agency in the child. The communal secure base is maintained only by appropriate exercise of agency by the parents and promotes the exercise of agency by the young.

Developmentally, then, attachment precedes exploration, which is to say that communion precedes agency. But, exploration leads, ultimately to the development not just of a private self but also of new relationships which culminate in the development of a reciprocal intimate relationship which culminates in pair bonding and parenting. Intimacy and parenting are, of course, a return to communion. As we have seen, parenting is communion (that is, attachment) in the service of agency (that is, the development of agency in the child) and agency (that is, the parental protection of the child) in the service of communion (that is, secure attachment for the child).

As adolescents and adults moving towards intimacy, we exercise agency-towards-communion. As parents providing security for our young, we exercise agency-within-communion. One very practical problem with viewing agency and communion as a polarity is that by so doing we risk not hearing and not seeing the agency-within-communion that characterizes caregivers within an attachment relationship. This could lead, for example, to a serious under-estimation of the prevalence and role of agency in the lives of women, and could indeed underlie the old view of the agency/communion polarity as a male/female polarity.

Finally, we consider the affective consequences of agency and the role of communion in containing those affects (West & Sheldon-Keller, 1994). Separation and individuation brings with it, along with the potential for agentic action, anxiety and fear associated with aloneness and individual responsibility for our present and future. Because anxiety blocks action, anxiety must be contained for effective agency. The anxiety of individuation can be contained by a communal orientation -- analogously to the containment of fear in the opening anecdote by the orientation towards the well being of those perceived as patients. The most effective communal containment of anxiety is offered by attachment relationships - recall that among the purposes of a secure base is comfort when distressed and reassurance when frightened. An internalized secure based generalizes so that attachment -- or communion -- offers the primary containment for the fear and anxiety associated with individual action -- or agency.

To summarize:

From Modell, we take an understanding of the private self and the necessity of adequate maternal nurturance (communion) for development of the private (agentic) self.

From Koestler, we take the necessary equilibrium between self-assertion (agency) and integration (communion) for the proper functioning of a complex system (personality).

From Gilligan, we take the essential connectedness of the disparate voices of empowerment of the self (agency) and sustenance of the community (communion).

From the writings from the Stone Center, we take the perspective of development, not as progression from attachment (communion) to separation/individuation (agency) but towards self-in-relation (agency-within-communion).

From Bowlby, we take the developmental precedence of attachment (communion) over exploration (agency); the necessity of parental agency to create the communal secure base; the necessity of the secure base to the exploration that leads in turn to relational intimacy and parenting.

From our own work, we take the use of attachment (communion) to contain the affective distress associated with action (agency).

So the new perspective we take from these varied viewpoints -- each supported by bodies of research -- is that agency and communion are not a polarity but a complex figure/ground, or an oscillation, that serve development optimally when operating in concert, not in opposition.

References

Bakan, D. (1966). *The duality of human existence: An essay on psychology and religion*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Bowlby, J. (1988). *A secure base*. New York: Basic Books.

Edelman, G. (1987). *Neural darwinism*. New York: Basic Books.

Fonagy, P., Steele, M., Steele, H., Moran, G. & Higgitt, A. (1991). The capacity for understanding mental states: The reflective self in parent and child and its significance for security of attachment. *Infant Mental Health Journal 12*: 201-218.

Gilligan, C. (1982/93). *In a different voice*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Hinde, R. (1982). Attachment: Some conceptual and biological issues. In C.M. Parkes & J. Stevenson-Hinde (Eds.), *The place of attachment in human behavior* (pp. 451-479). Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

Jordan, J.V., Kaplan, A.G., Miller, J.B., Stiver, I.P. & Surrey, J.L. (1991). *Women's growth in connection*. New York: The Guilford Press.

Koestler, A. (1967). *The ghost in the machine*. London: Hutchinson.

Modell, A. (1993). *The private self*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Sroufe, L.A. & Waters, E. (1977). Attachment as an organizing construct. *Child Development 48*: 1184-1199.

Watts, A. (1960). *This is it, and other essays on Zen and spiritual experience*. New York: Pantheon Books.

West, M. & Sheldon-Keller, A. (1994). *Patterns of relating*. New York: Guilford Press.

Winnicott, D. (1965). *The maturational process and the facilitating environment*. New York: International Universities Press.